Wildlife food tested at Coffeeville lab

By Ed Blake

Tucked away inconspicuously in the hills and hollows of north Central Mississippi is a quarter-of-a-century old research farm run by the U. S. Soil Conservation Service for the purpose of finding and developing the practical use of plants from the world over which contribute to the conservation and enhancement of the nation's out-of-doors.

Known as the Coffeeville Plant Materials Center and located only a few miles east of the Tillatoba exit from I-55 in Yalobusha county, this facility serves the states of Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas—and parts of Tennessee and Alabama—by providing field tests of plant materials that may have good application in this part of the deep South.

Last week the center invited area agriculturists to its test plots to look at on-going plant research, and to brief them on a number of plants that have been successfully tested at the center that have characteristics which make them desirable additions to local farm and other lands to help conserve natural resources including wildlife.

At the outdoor lab, for each plant specie selected, over a hundred species are tested under the normal soil and climatic conditions of the area. Among the plants that have been found to be at the head of their classes recently and released for commercial production with a nod of approval from the research personnel are such plant names as Chiwapa Japanese millet for wildlife food, Meechee arrowleaf clover for high forage production, Wilmington bahiagrass for pasture and erosion control, Halifax maidencane for streambank erosion control, Quail Haven reseeding and running soybeans for wildlife food, and others.

An important aspect of the conservation research is directed toward decreasing the costs of needed conservation practices. As examples, grasses are being found that make it possible for farmers to substitute grassy drainage channels for expensive pipes that often have been prescribed in the past to control heavy rainfall run-offs from farmlands. This saves big dollars for farmers who often are hard pressed to find enough capital for investment in conservation practices.

Halifax maidencane is a plant recommended following field testing for shoreline erosion control bordering lakes and streams. The search pinpointed that such plants must be shade-tolerant as well as sun-tolerant.

As a result of the research with maidencane, Boy Scouts established these plants on the face of a dam on a lake on a Scout reservation in Copiah County and completely controlled wave action's often deteriorating effects on the dam. It was estimated that the planting of maidencane saved $80,000 at the lake, since that amount was the low bid for installing rock riprap to do the same job.

The Coffeeville plant research center is cooperating with other such centers in different states to co-release two plants that make significant contributions as wildlife food. These are Gobbler sawtooth oak and Ellagood autumn olive. Acorns of the sawtooth oak are relished by turkey and deer while it also is an attractive medium-size tree. The fruit of the autumn olive is eaten by many kinds of birds and the shrub doubles as informal hedges, barriers, and windbreaks.

The search for useful conservation plants and their testing goes on—with special focus today on finding remedies for 'salt licks' in fields and pastures, nearly sterile mine spoil areas, soils damaged by industrial wastes, streambanks subject to erosion, and other needs.

Plant explorers have combed the world looking for plants to solve environmental problems, yet many of the best have been found in backyards, along roadsides, and even in pockets in busy cities. Pensacola bahiagrass, now established on some 10 million acres of pasturelands in the South is one of these, found growing in a tiny patch in the city of Pensacola, Florida, in 1937.

So today, the plant research centers, here and in other states, invite everyone to help find the plants that may contribute to the solution of modern environmental problems or to create new opportunities.